



Superblock Barcelona

SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY AND
QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE CITY

Summary

According to official data, air pollution levels caused by traffic within the city of Barcelona result in the deaths of around 1,000 people each year, and are directly responsible for 33% of new cases of childhood asthma as well as 11% of lung cancer cases. In addition to the pollution they generate (air and noise), private vehicles occupy a disproportionate amount of public space: while they account for only 25% of all journeys made in the city, they take up almost 60% of urban space in order to move around and park. This results in traffic congestion and an increased risk of accidents, which in turn act as deterrents to walking or cycling, as well as socialising in public space, contributing to the perpetuation of sedentary lifestyles and the impoverishment of outdoor social life.

In view of this evidence, there was a clear need to intervene,

proposing an urban model that harmonises the need to protect people's lives and health while ensuring sustainable mobility in the city.

The **Superblock Barcelona** is articulated as a comprehensive plan that aims to foster the equitable, healthy, safe and sustainable use of urban space. To achieve this, a hierarchy of roads has been established according to their connectivity, functionality and size: main roads, local or secondary roads, and residential roads. Motorised and essential traffic (prioritising public transport, freight transport and fast-moving bicycles) principally circulate on main roads and, to a lesser extent, on secondary roads. On residential roads, motorised traffic and kerbside parking for vehicles is kept to a minimum, and pedestrians and slow-moving bicycles are given preference.

With this new organisation of mobility, space is freed up for other public uses such as walking, resting, playing and community activities, and green areas are expanded. The model proactively involves citizens in all phases of implementation and helps to generate behavioural changes in favour of sustainability and health.

City:

Barcelona

Country:

Spain

Inhabitants:

1,609,000

Topics:

Environment,
Urban development, Citizen
participation, Health

In
1990
Barcelona
organised the 1st
International Congress
of Educating Cities,
which gave rise to
the Charter and the
Association



Context

Barcelona is a mediterranean city with a population of 1,609,000 inhabitants. The city and its metropolitan area boast leading industrial hubs (such as those of the chemical, food and automotive industries) as well as significant economic activity in the tourism and service sectors.

It is a compact city, with high residential density, an ageing housing stock, a lack of green spaces and a mobility that is excessively dependent on motorised vehicles. These are all factors that negatively affect Barcelona's environmental conditions and the health of its inhabitants.

Goals

- ▶ Improve the quality of life, safety and health of citizens through the management of mobility with environmental and social sustainability criteria.
- ▶ Promote the equitable use of public space in order to foster spaces for meeting, socialising, exchange, culture and citizenship, and not only as a mere space to commute.
- ▶ Prioritise sustainable journeys (on foot, by bike or public transport) over those carried out in private vehicles.
- ▶ Increase the amount of green spaces available in the city.

Methodology

The Superblock model was first introduced in a neighbourhood within Barcelona in 2006 on an experimental basis, although there had been previous examples in areas of the city's historical centre in 1993. It currently constitutes a city project that will gradually be extended to other neighbourhoods.

The Superblock is a variable grouping of urban fabric with residential streets of between 300 and 500 metres on each side. The main traffic and public transport is redirected to the roads around the perimeter. Deterrents are introduced into the design of these interior residential streets to prevent people from crossing



through them in a straight line and to limit speed to 10 km/h, with traffic being restricted to only that necessary to guarantee access to neighbours, businesses and emergency services. Kerbside parking spaces are eliminated (which can be replaced by underground parking) and the space is redistributed with pedestrian areas, squares, and spaces for meeting and playing, reconfiguring them into unique platforms with no architectural barriers, and creating green areas. By doing this, up to 70% of space is reclaimed for citizens, while eliminating only 25% of traffic. Complementary measures, such as the increase in parking prices for non-residents, the reduction of kerbside parking, improvements in public transport and cycle lanes, also lead to a reduction in the number of private vehicles on the roads. By extending the model across the city, a comprehensive transformation of the urban metabolism is promoted.

The process of converting an urban environment into a Superblock is carried out through a participatory approach. A

promoter group is created in each area where it is implemented, made up of the territory's representative individuals and/or associations, which follow up the project. The promoter group acts as a link between the City Council's technical team and the local residents, helping to define the participatory spaces and validating the results of the different participatory workshops and the technical work carried out, throughout the three phases of the process:

1. Presentation of the model.

Workshops and working sessions with associations, experts and social organisations pertaining to the territory in order to present, enrich and validate the objectives and criteria of the model. These meetings take place within the framework of the sessions related to the Action Plan for the Superblock Programme in the districts in which they are implemented.

2. Definition and drafting of the Action Plan. Aims to gather all of the proposals, initiatives and interventions that will define the application of the model in

a specific area. On the basis of the knowledge and participatory diagnosis carried out jointly with local residents and groups (through in-person workshops and a digital platform), concrete proposals are formulated to be prioritised in the specific action plan (based on criteria of technical, economic and time availability).

3. Projects and implementation.

Implementation of the definitive proposal in accordance with the prioritisation carried out, with initiatives that may be functional, tactical or structural in nature. In this phase, the actions to achieve change in the functioning or improvement of the habitability of the space and its rewilding are defined: traffic calming, changes in signage and/or traffic direction, the creation of a square, widening of pavements, etc.



★ Evaluation

The Superblock model (based on the principles of ecosystemic urbanism), allows for a profound transformation of the city model without major economic investment, since it does not require the construction of large infrastructures or demolition work. Through simple urban transformations, mobility can be managed, limiting the negative effects of the presence of private vehicles in public space and consequently improving citizens' health, safety and well-being.

Wherever it has been implemented, positive effects on residents' quality of life have been observed, in aspects such as: the reduction of air and noise pollution rates; an increase in green areas; the reduction of road accident rates; increased use of public space for socialising (to play, meet, go for a walk) and an improvement in the economic performance of local businesses within this area. In a qualitative dimension, the fact of having public space that is free from vehicles has favoured more active lifestyles and has generated opportunities to socialise in streets that had previously been neglected. In some cases, this has led to a revitalisation of the social fabric, with the creation of neighbourhood associations that aim to organise fun, cultural and civic activities in the freed-up public spaces.

Although the model is now well-accepted by the general public (especially in those areas where it has already been introduced), it was initially

met with strong opposition. This was mainly due to an implementation strategy that did not sufficiently take into account the voices of citizens and their effective participation in the design and implementation of the various initiatives. Consequently, citizen participation is now present through a cross-cutting approach at all stages of intervention.

In 2010, the Superblock plan implemented in the Gràcia district of Barcelona was recognised as a Best Practice by UN-Habitat, and in 2018, that of the Llacuna neighbourhood in the Poblenou district obtained a Special Mention from the European Prize for Urban Public Space. Other cities in Spain (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Viladecans, A Coruña...) and across the world (Quito, Buenos Aires, Vancouver...) are also currently implementing this model.

➡ Future proposals

The programme currently has eight active experiences within the city that are in different phases of implementation, and it is intended to extend the programme across the city in the medium-term future.



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View the
experience in the
Bank

